

Representation of Religious Trauma in Sefi Attah's "Hailstones from Zamfara" in *News from Home and Other Stories*

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Abstract

This study examines Sefi Attah's depiction of the psychological burden on women of the trauma of violence and projects religion as a factor which engenders that violence. This is with a view to identifying the patterns of faith-based domestic violence, and their implications on the psychological and emotional well-being of the victims. The study employed qualitative descriptive content analysis. It draws its theoretical insight from Rational Choice Theory (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). This is relevant to the study because it attempts at providing a link between domestic abuse and religion. The study revealed that the private and personal lives of women are one of the unrecognised issues which affect their mental health. The findings further showed that there is degradation and the sublime traumatising of women under the guise of religion in some cases. Moreover, victims of faith-based violence experience layers of complex psychological distress as a result of being constantly abused in marriage. It concludes that religious practices which enforce male dominance are central to the aggressive and violent tendencies exhibited by perpetrators of domestic violence.

Keywords: *faith-based violence, religious trauma, Sefi Attah*

1. Introduction

Although there have been various polemical discussions on the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in religion and gender discourses, only a few studies in the humanities have investigated the theoretical and textual explanations to show readers that novelists are not confined to mere aestheticism and verbal entertainment. This paper improves the discussion on how religion contributes to creating an environment in which violence against women has been normalised. The significance of this discovery is to reveal that though faith traditions disapprove of VAWG, patriarchal interpretations of religious books and practices strengthens the pattern of male dominance and oppression. The WHO (2024) noted that about one in three women worldwide have been subjected to some form of physical or sexual violence their lifetime. In a similar vein, the global estimate in a statistic published by WHO in 2021 reported that 31% of Nigerian women experience physical intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. The UN General Assembly (1993) defines VAWG as "... any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women (and girls) including threats to such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

On the praxis of faith and spirituality, Bell & Mattis (2000) and Porreca, Magiabosco, Pereira de Suza (2024) note that religious beliefs should function as a protective factor against intimate partner violence, and females who seek partners who have similar religious and spiritual values experience less violence. Additionally, these scholars observe that the irony in the dilemma of faith and spirituality is that the intersection between both serve as mechanisms for achieving resilience in the face of domestic assault or as contributors to women's vulnerability. This position corroborates with Giesbrecht and Sevcik's (2000) summation that the experiences and recovery of victims of VAWG occur within the context of their faith.

2. Religion and Patriarchy in Context

Bartkowski (1997) avers that all world religions appear connected by the seeds and common threads of male patriarchy: a hypothetical social system based upon the absolute authority of the father or an

elderly male over the family group (The concept is often used, by extension (in anthropology and feminism, for example), to refer to the expectation that men take primary responsibility for the welfare of the community as a whole, acting as representatives of a male God via public office.

According to Buzawa and Buzawa (2003), religions simply affirmed male-dominated family structures that were already in existence. From the earliest record, ‘most societies gave the patriarch of the family the right to use force against women and children under his control’ (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003:57). Roman law, for instance, gave legal guardianship of a wife to her husband. This concept of *patria potestas*, according to Buzawa & Buzawa, (2003), included the largely unfettered ability of the husband to beat his wife legally, who became, in legal effect, his “daughter.” By extension, patriarchal beliefs reserved leadership roles to males -while limiting female involvement in rituals - in the belief that women were less connected to God.

Highlighting the significant roles of religion in violence against women and girls, the *Quran* succinctly states:

“Men are in charge of women by (right of) what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend (for maintenance) from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient guarding in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard. But those (wives) from whom you fear arrogance (first) advise them, (then if they persist), forsake them in bed; and (finally), strike them. But if they obey you (once more), seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is Glorious! (The *Quran*, Surah An-Nisa 4:34).”

This suggests that beliefs regarding sex/role expectations within society contribute to a patriarchal system that assigns women a subordinate role to men. This is especially evident within religious circles as men assume primary leadership roles within nearly all facets of Islam as a religion. Likewise, in many mainline Christian denominations, the idea of women seeking ordination and positions of authority is generally discouraged. Many seminal texts, including the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran all contain passages that, if literally read, seem to subordinate women, or emphasize family solidarity and preservation to the exclusion of concerns over the physical safety of the wife.

In Christianity, much of the rationale between religiosity and intimate partner violence is predicated on the assumption that members of the more fundamentalist groups tend to be more patriarchal. After all, strong patriarchal beliefs are “founded on the conviction that in the beginning Eve was created from Adam’s rib in order to serve him” (Scanzoni, 1988). Consequently, and in close alignment with feminist interpretations, patriarchy tends to influence the reading of scripture.

Moreover, male and female biblical scholars alike tend to ‘read as men having internalised the norms of androcentric scholarship in which the male focus and patriarchal worldview of the biblical text is paralleled in the practice and history of biblical exegesis’ (Reinhartz, 2000). This position by Reinhartz is regarded by some as patriarchal, misogynistic, and biased in its interpretation. Corroborating Reinhartz’s views on the male reading of scripture is Schussler’s (1985) who critique accordingly that: ‘Not only is (the) scripture interpreted by a long line of men and proclaimed in patriarchal churches. It is also authored by men, written in androcentric language, reflective of religious male experience, selected and transmitted by male religious leadership. Without question, the Bible is a male book.

The submission of the aforementioned scholar acknowledges the undeniable singular influence of the male voice and value system in the composition, reading, and interpretation of scripture. Over time, various religious bodies have begun to recognise and acknowledge the symbolic reality of patriarchal scripture, proof-texting, and the potential for ‘intimate partner violence’ within this context. Indeed, many denominations have taken reasonable measures to eliminate ‘intimate partner violence’ and the physical domination of women. Some denominations have sermons especially designed to acknowledge and raise awareness about this issue. Yet, the transition from male domination to equality has been neither swift nor smooth. Rather, some victims, seeking refuge in the wisdom and comfort of clergy,

often times received further unexpected condemnation instead of sympathy and compassion (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1988).

For instance, women are reminded that marriage is God's holiest institution and encouraged to remain silent, persevere, and lean on His everlasting words. Moreover, they are re-minded that `what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. ` *The King James Version* (KJV, 2014, Matthew, 19:6). To this end, this injunction is often a part of the Christian marriage ceremony that re-emphasises God's authority over man, and by extension, man's authority over women.

Additional accounts of male domination and control over women in the Bible is found in Genesis, 2:22 which reads: `And the rib that the Lord God has taken from the man he made into a woman` (KJV, 2014). Deeply ingrained within the above passages is the image of subservience, obedience, and submission of women unto men (i.e., wives unto husbands). What this means is that failure to adhere to these marital expectations creates conflict that originates as emotional abuse, moderate chastisement which eventually culminates severe violence and trauma. The progression of the aforementioned could result from a selective reading of the following passage (where female adultery intersects with male jealousy), which provides enough ammunition for some men to use violence.

“This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, though under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself or when the spirit of jealousy comes upon a man and he is jealous of his wife; then he shall set the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall execute upon her all this law. (KJV, 2014, Numbers 5:29-30).”

Given the general tendencies of religious leaders to ignore or fail to acknowledge abuse within its congregation—even in instances of adultery—where the women might appear complicit in the eyes of many. Some men might insist on their right to control their wives and justify that claim by referencing the expressions of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. There, he wrote:

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. (KJV, 2014, Ephesians 5:22-24).”

While this directive tends to perpetuate the control of wives by husbands, the larger problem is that some men do not acknowledge the verses that immediately follow, where husbands are instructed on how to treat their wives. It reads:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (KJV, 2014, Ephesians 5:25-28).”

The above scripture serves to remind Christians (and others) of an obligation to do unto others, as they would have others do unto them: to love their neighbours as they love God, and to love their wife as God loves the church.

3. Religion and Domestic Violence

Religious traditions are often misinterpreted, particularly by abusers, to justify their abusive behaviours. Usually, such support comes from citing selected passages from sacred scriptures or teachings of a particular religious community, or from arguing for the authority of traditional practices from the past that justify violence, especially against women. Similar arguments could be made for any number of

social behaviours that are deemed unjust or oppressive today, such as racism and economic enslavement. At the same time, religious beliefs can also be a source of spiritual and moral strength. Religious teachings are often sources of hope and inspiration. A wider community motivated by faith can provide sanctuary in the form of support, shelter, and safety from domestic violence. In addition to physical, sexual, psychological and/or financial abuse, domestic violence may also include spiritual abuse. This could result in people questioning their spiritual and religious beliefs and values, and could also make them fearful of escalating the abuse if their partner has forbidden them to practice their faith. Religion and spirituality can often be a source of support and healing for those experiencing domestic violence. However, religion and spirituality can also be used as a tool to control or manipulate an individual.

4. Literature Review

Pertek *et al.*'s (2023) summation is critical in its delineation of religious resources and gender-based violence. With a focus on survivors rather than the injurious nature of the violence and its long-lasting effects, the scholars provide relatable evidence for how the victims map out coping strategies on domestic violence.

Similarly, notable scholars like Carlson (2005); Ghafournia (2017) Khalaf-Elledge (2021); Chitu (2023); and Le Roux and Pertek (2023) among others have identified that male centered perspective interpretation of religious texts make women susceptible to physical, sexual, and psychological harm. While Ghafournia (2017) identified Muslim women as victims of domestic violence, Carlson (2005), Khalaf-Elledge (2021); Chitu (2023); Le Roux and Pertek (2023) observe that religion reinforces violence against women. This point is clearly highlighted by the religious convictions of the perpetrators of marital violence and the experiences of the women.

Reasoning from a sociological perspective, Simister & Kowalewska (2016) specify that Catholic women have a higher risk of VAWG because of the ban on divorce by the Catholic churches. McPhillips and Page (2021) on the other hand while enunciating their views contend that religion play a role in upholding violent norms, whether through the disciplining of the body or through discursive control that may lead to women being harmed physically, sexually, psychologically and spiritually. McPhillips and Page's (2021) explication of the role of religion in engendering trauma may have been borne out of the traumatisation of women as a result of VAWG. Clearly, both Simister & Kowalewska (2016) and McPhillips and Page (2021) foreground their views of religious trauma and they relate them to sublimation of trauma by women in religious and cultural space.

4.1. Theoretical Framework

Tedeschi and Felson (1994) in *Violence Aggression and Coercive Action* provide a structural and theoretical framework which provides the link between wife battering and religion. They developed a social-interactionist theory by showing that violence serves specific social and religious purposes such as establishing subjective justice and enhancing or defending social identities. For Tedeschi and Felson (1994), there are certain religious tenants that inevitably binds women to abusive relationships. In a style reminiscent of McPhillips and Page's (2021) delineation of religious trauma, it could be explained that batterers selectively misinterpret scriptures to rationalise or justify violence, a position akin to Attah's creation and recreation of how religious traditions and socio-cultural institutions support GBV through patriarchal interpretations and practices.

4.2. Purpose of the Study

The study examines representation of religious trauma in Sefi Attah's *Hailstones from Zamfara*. The aim is to consider how patriarchal interpretation of religious text influence unequal distribution of power within the cultural and domestic space leading to feasible exploitation, oppression or marginalization of the female gender. The objectives are to highlight the patterns and dimension of violence, investigate how wrong exposition of religious texts make women vulnerable to domestic

violence, determine how religious convictions reinforce violence in Sefi Attah's *News from Home and Other Stories*.

4.3. Method

Sefi Attah's *Hailstones from Zamfara* constitutes the data for this study. The study adopts a qualitative research design. Excerpts were purposively selected from Attah's *Hailstones from Zamfara* after a close reading of the text relating to VAWG activities in insurgencies. The motivation for the choice of the sampled excerpts lies in the representation of religious trauma in the text. The selected excerpts of the protagonist is interrogated to discover the effects of trauma on the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of the characters.

The approach focuses on investigating how the thoughts, emotions, feelings, acts, inactions, and motivations of the perpetrators of religious trauma are in relation the theoretical framework in the study. Specific experiences are described in terms of how they portray religion as engendering trauma. The study engages Tedeschi & Felson's (1994) Rational Choice Theory to examine how patriarchal interpretation of religious text foster women's vulnerability to violence. The study attempts to offer a nuance understanding of how religion engender violence against women and girls. In the novel under study, the significance of religion in reinforcing misogyny is projected in the novel; religion shape power imbalances and women's susceptibility to violence.

5. Findings and Discussion

Religious trauma is a deep emotional wound especially when it is perpetuated by tenets of high control religious system. This form of trauma is as a result of psychological or emotional distress resulting from individual's involvement in a religious system or faith community. It also occurs when the beliefs, practices or experiences within a religious context becomes harmful or traumatic for someone. The complexities of trauma are summated in the fact that in most religious and cultural communities, the practice of wife battering or VAWG has been accepted as ordinary. Additionally, a characteristic feature of religious trauma is that it often takes subtle and less overt form.

Ideologically, religion and the society places women with subservient and defined roles. Suffice to say that contemporary Nigerian female novelists such as: Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Attah, Diana Evans, Oyinkan Braiwai and Lola Shoneyin have explored constellation of socio-cultural practices such as gender subjugation, domestic violence, sexual assault, polygamy, and poverty as a subtle form of trauma. In *Hailstones from Zamfara*, Attah amplifies the sublime traumatising of women across social, cultural, religious and political space. She portrays a subservient and subdued image of a woman who breaks off from culturally defined roles. Attah specifically takes a polemical look at religion and the mental health of women as she interrogates the influence of religion as a factor capable of engendering trauma in women.

The novelist's stance on religious extremism, domestic violence, and child marriage and the trauma resulting from the conflagration of cultural and religious misinterpretation shows the nature of traditional African society. A society that expects a woman to condone whatever happens to her under the guise of the experiences that must be endured in marriage. In *Hailstones from Zamfara*, Attah captures the experiences of Amina Lawal Kurami, a woman in Northern Nigeria who was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery and for conceiving a child out of wedlock in an Islamic Shariah court. In the context of this study, religion has a huge influence on women's emotional stability.

A situation where a man attributes his being constantly drunk to his wife's illicit affair and is absolved of whatever violence he inflicts on the woman when he is drunk leaves the woman vulnerable and in a state of psychological and emotional trauma. The narrator also suggests that it is almost impossible for a woman to reach a state of piety. Thus, apart from the guilt the narrator feels, she looks forward to death and seems to suggest that only in death will she reach a magnificent state, like the mother of the Holy Prophet.

The ethical standard of “I divorce thee” twice described in the Holy Quran as substantiated by the narrator’s husband initiates the throng of emotional trauma for the narrator and her subsequent clandestine relationship. In *Hailstones on Zamfara*, Attah recounts the domestic abuse of a fourteen-year-old girl by her husband. Apart from being married as an under-aged bride, she became partially deaf due to constant beating. Attah turns our attention to the constant trauma she suffers from as a result of domestic violence. Informing her husband of the physical and psychological assault she often suffers from her marriage she reports: “My left ear is damaged from the beating you gave me.”

Sometimes I hear, sometimes I don’t even if I face Mecca’ (*Hailstones from Zamfara*, p.16). While the woman in actual life is unmarried, Attah’s character was married and had borne children for her husband who constantly batter her once he is under the influence of alcohol. In a bid to handle the psychological and physical torture she is often made to pass through; she resorts to having an affair with an invisible man who is only seen by her. While there is no justification for a woman to be emotionally involved with another man outside her home, the unnamed character sought relief from emotional, physical and psychological trauma and by resorting to an extra-marital affair.

Hailstones from Zamfara contains accounts of both physical and psychic pain. Gender violence is perpetrated on women's bodies in order to create a new symbolic entity; the repressed female. Inadvertently, there is a difficulty in crossing rhetorical divides regarding the effect of intimate violence on young brides, which has frequently been a source of contention in national discourse. This may probably be a result of diverse religious opinions on the subject. Adimula & Ijere (2018, p.20) identify ‘wife-rape’ as a social stigma. These scholars assert that such experience arises from the unwritten law imposed by the society that forces women against their will to have sex with their husbands irrespective of their psychological or emotional preparedness. This type of trauma has the psychological implication that these women are physically and emotionally forced and threatened with sexual activities.

The culture of remaining silent and not being able to tell their family the actual state of things in their marriages traumatises women. In a home where the husband drinks to a state of stupor, resistance to orgy sex on such occasions brings about beatings. Thus, the unnamed female character often acts as a recluse in her home because tradition and religion forbid her from returning to her parents. Here, Attah pitches humanity against under-aged marriage, domestic violence, and religious extremism in a society like ours which fails to take cognizance of trauma arising from such experiences. Through the unnamed character in *News from Home*, Attah recapture trauma of intimate partners abuse in its sublimity. To the novelist, when a religious structure upholds spousal control, the society attains a height of decadence that does not only violate women but keeps them in perpetual subjection.

Attah also criticises such debauchery which expects a woman to be enthusiastic about the betrothal of a second wife. The character is battered by her husband for refusing to chaperone ‘his new bride, a girl the same age as my eldest daughter Fatima’ (*Hailstones on Zamfara*, p.16). With men like Mallam Sanusi, who cut off his daughter’s foot for running away from her husband’s house, women have to remain in marriage irrespective of the physical, psychological and emotional torture meted out on them by their husbands. For the protagonist, therefore, her inability to deal with the constant abuse by her husband coupled with the knowledge of the violent treatment she would receive from her father if she mistakenly returns home makes her develop a form of condensation; an inherent inability to fuse the repressed unconscious in her relationships. The trauma she suffers leaves her morose as she drifts aimlessly around the house.

Another form of trauma inflicted on the vulnerable females in ‘*Hailstones*’ could be traced to the libidinal deposit of masculinist ego, authoritarianism, arrogance, and sheer disrespect for womanhood, among many vices that have been observed as a characteristic of narcissistic spouses. The impunity enjoyed by the unnamed husband in the story under the guise of religion and marriage makes him feel invulnerable and omnipotent, despite the fact that he is feared and is the source of that fear.

Bergen, (1996) and Alokun, (2013) assert that sexual abuse is prevalent in violent relationships and most women who have been raped in marriage have been physically assaulted by their husbands. They

seem to suggest that the violence which men have exhibited towards their wives is overtly or indirectly indicative of the general perception the larger society has towards women. The truncation of dreams and wishes of the subjugated female character seems to be another source of trauma for most Nigerian women. Unfortunately, the age-long tradition of patriarchy and phallocracy has hindered most women from fulfilling their political, social, economic, and educational capabilities.

The humiliations, mistreatment, and vexations from the husband have an adverse effect on the self-esteem of the protagonist. Similarly, fear, anxiety, distress, and desperation often affect the personality of abused victims. Hence, the inability of victims of domestic trauma to come out of their anguish and connect with their psychological and internalised stress has practically made it impossible for most of them to maintain significant healthy relationships. This factor could be traced to the beginning of the adulterous relationship of the unnamed protagonist in Attah's *Hailstones* from Zamfara.

Also, the fragmented relationship the unnamed protagonist has with her husband confirms her as an objectified being whose existence is solely to bringing forth children and satisfying her husband's sexual desire. This process constitutes traumatic psychoses the character exhibited whenever the husband is around. In most cases, this does not last long when the traumatised finds solidarity or binary cord with someone who understands the physic pain they are experiencing. As a result, the woman tries to connect with anyone and everyone she can. As a result of being victims, the traumatised individual gathers what has been spoiled, re-arms her shattered personality, and craves to meet someone who accepts, appreciates, and values her, including what has been done to her.

Besides, Attah's deliberate refusal to give the abused women names and voices further portends their deprivation and lack of choice as they are reduced to objects of sexual gratification within the confines of their matrimonial space where they should have experienced a sense of wholeness. Rishipal (2013) stresses further that such a condition affects an individual's behaviour and performance such that they are unable to cultivate or sustain respectable inter-personal relationships.

Other effects of traumatisaion that are frequently ignored include: the inability to make rational decisions, display of inappropriate behaviors or emotions in ordinary situations, having a general or pervasive depressive mood, having a propensity to manifest physical symptoms of psychosomatic disorders, or having fears related to personal issues. Learning difficulties, immaturity (irrational crying, temper tantrums, poor coping skills), hyperactivity (short attention span, impulsiveness), aggression/self-injurious behavior (acting out, fighting), withdrawal (failure to initiate interaction with others, retreat from an exchange of social interaction, excessive fear or anxiety), and (academically performing below grade level). For Attah, the litanies of experiences that induce trauma in *Hailstones* on Zamfara include: polygamy, domestic violence and poverty.

Living with the perpetrator of domestic violence, in this instance, the supposed husband of the unnamed protagonist constantly exposes the victim to constant emotional, physical and verbal abuse. The consequence of this is Post Traumatic Stress. Attah notes that women experiencing intimate partner abuse frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For the senior wife, infidelity becomes a means of coping with the ongoing abuse. Also, since it is practically a difficult task to discern repressed emotions, especially in life-long relationships such as marriage, the victims in such relationships are left to grapple with the pain of repressed emotional, physical, and psychological pain in marriages.

The implication of PTSD in the marital relationship which Attah explores provides a model for examining the causes of neuroses in young brides who are given out in marriages without physical, emotional, and psychological preparedness. Most especially, it provides a pattern for examining what goes on in the minds of women who have co-wives in marriages and those whose husbands abuse physically, verbally, and emotionally.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the representation of religious trauma in Sefi Attah's *News from Home and Other Stories*. Religious trauma as seen from this study emanates from religious practices which makes the women susceptible to domestic violence. In this case, the depiction of religious trauma operates through unequal power structures and disadvantage position religion has placed on women. Attah's representation of trauma sets a stage for a consciousness that aim to propel women to the place where they can negotiate trauma and healing. Findings from this research established that women's individual and sexual freedom cannot be guaranteed because of doctrinal teachings which binds women to abusive relationships. The study advocates that a proper understanding of the tenets of religion and regular sensitization of religious leaders are vital for minimizing misinterpretation of religious texts. It is therefore recommended that counselling and therapy sessions should be organized for victims of spousal abuse to achieve emotional stability, healing and recovery from the trauma of domestic violence.

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